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MARY OF BETHANY

BY J. R. MILLER

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MARY OF BETHANY

A TALK TO CHRISTIAN YOUNG WOMEN

BY

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"*She had a sister called Mary, who also sat at the Lord's feet, and heard his word.*" — St. Luke, x. 39.

"*Mary therefore, when she came where Jesus was, and saw him, fell down at his feet.*" — St. John, xi. 32.

"*Mary therefore took a pound of ointment of pure nard, very precious, and anointed the feet of Jesus.*" — St. John, xii. 3.

MARY OF BETHANY.

The Bethany home is one of the most sacred spots in Palestine. There it was that Jesus found a shelter of love amid enmities and antagonisms. There his heart found rest after being wearied and hurt by the unbelief, criticism, and hypocrisy of the rulers. It is a joy to think of the comfort that he found in that sweet home, that there was one spot where he was sure of love, and where he knew that no hostile eye was upon him and no unfriendly ear was listening to catch him in his words.

There were two sisters in that home. Both of them loved the Master, and both were dear to him. Each showed her love in her own way. It is to one of these, however, to Mary, that we are now to turn our thoughts. Mary is easily recognized among our Lord's friends, as she appears always in the same attitude. As we know Martha wherever we see her by her diligent, eager serving, so we know Mary by her posture at the feet of Jesus. Three times only is she seen in the Gospel story, and each time she is at her wonted place. First, we find her sitting at Christ's feet as a learner,

eagerly listening to his words. When she next appears there is a great sorrow in the Bethany home. Her only brother is dead, and when Jesus comes Mary goes out to meet him and falls at his feet in her grief, this time seeking comfort. Once again we see her. Jesus is at the table, an honored guest. As usual, Martha is serving. Again Mary is at her Lord's feet, this time anointing him with her costly ointment.

This characteristic picture of Mary is one that every Christian young woman ought to keep framed in her heart. It is full of suggestion. At Christ's feet is the place of discipleship, where one learns the lessons the Master has to teach, where one's soul receives the blessings he has to give. It is the place, too, of shelter and comfort, to which one should flee in danger and sorrow. Then it is the place of devotion, of consecration, of service. We will study in order each of these three scenes in which Mary appears.

We see her first *as a learner.* Jesus has come into the Bethany home. Martha is busy entertaining him in her capacity of hostess. But Mary drops all her tasks and sits down at his feet to listen to his words. Longfellow represents Mary saying to Jesus:

"O Master, when thou comest it is always
A Sabbath in the house. I cannot work:
I must sit at thy feet, must see thee, hear thee.
I have a feeble, wayward, doubting heart,
Incapable of endurance or great thoughts,

Striving for something that it cannot reach,
Baffled and disappointed, wounded, hungry;
And only when I hear thee am I happy,
And only when I see thee am at peace.
. . . . . .
Only to be with thee, only to see thee
Sufficeth me. My heart is then at rest."

Every young woman should learn the lesson that there can be for her no beautiful Christian character, no sweet influence pouring out from her life, no blessed ministry giving comfort and joy to others, unless she first sit at Christ's feet as a learner. She must receive before she can give. This is the vital principle in Christian life. We can give out to others only what God has first given to us.

You see a beautiful rose bathed in the summer sunshine and pouring forth its sweetness. "I would have my life like the rose," you say. Yes; but where did the rose get its loveliness and its fragrance? Down out of the sky, did it not? It looked up and opened its heart, and the sun poured his warm beams into the flower's bosom, and out of the air at night came the gentle dew and crept into the flower's folds, and the beauty burst out and the sweetness flowed forth.

Would you have your life like the rose? You must commune with Christ. You must open your heart to the warmth of his love. You must take his words into your soul. You must let him fill you with his own blessed life. All you can bring

to Christ is your own emptiness — the emptiness of penitence, of humility, of a thirsty soul. The poet speaks of Mary's eyes as "homes of silent prayer." Her eyes of prayer told of a great heart-hunger. She did not talk in Christ's presence. She had nothing to say. She wanted him to speak to her. And any word he spoke went down deep into her heart and became a blessing there, pouring its sweet influence through all her life.

Here we get the first lesson from Mary. You must sit at Christ's feet as a learner, as a receiver. Let him teach you. Let him pour his own life and love into your heart. The first thing is, not what you shall do for Christ, but what you shall let Christ do for you; not what you shall give to him, but what you shall receive from him. Keep all the windows of your soul open toward him, that the light from his face may shine into the very depths of your being. Take his words into your heart and ponder them with love and prayer, until they open out and fill you with their own life and spirit. Says Professor Drummond: "Ten minutes spent in Christ's society every day, aye, two minutes, if it is face to face and heart to heart, will make all things different. Throughout the whole day, your actions, down to the last detail, will do homage to that early vision."

We can look at Mary further, to see the effects of her sitting at Christ's feet, the outcome of the lessons she learned there and the divine influences that there entered her soul. Surely her life grew

into sweet beauty. Note some of the elements of loveliness we find in her.

There was purity of heart. You remember our Lord's beatitude for purity, "Blessed are the pure in heart; for they shall see God." It was Mary's purity that made her so beautiful in the eyes of Christ. As he looked down into the depths of her soul, when she sat there at his feet, he saw clearness and whiteness.

Need I say that one of the first essential qualities in all beautiful womanhood is purity? How I pity the women who in tender youth have missed the shelter of a holy home and have been exposed to the rude touches of a defiling world, until the delicate bloom of innocence is gone from their lives! How I pity the young girls who spend the evenings on the streets, amid associations and with conversation and companionship which will make them forever incapable of the fairest loveliness and the truest refinement of Christlike womanhood! The mothers of girls should be charged to guard the lives of their daughters from every unhallowing contact with the world and to teach them from infancy the divineness of heart-purity. Girls and young women should set before themselves continually an ideal of spotless purity, and should strive to reach it at whatever cost.

There is a pathetic story of an old artist who gave his life to save his ideal. He had his great masterpiece in wet clay standing in his garret, which in his poverty was both studio and bed-room

to him. It grew very cold one night and the old man knew there was danger that the water in the interstices of the clay would freeze and destroy his work. So he arose, and taking the clothes from his bed, he reverently and affectionately wrapped them around his statue to save it. Then he lay down, uncovered, to wait for the morning. When his friends came to his garret, after the sun had risen, they found the statue warmly covered and preserved, but the old sculptor they found cold and dead upon his bed. He had died that his beautiful ideal might not be injured.

In the soul of every Christian young woman the image of Christ shines as the ideal into which she would fashion her own life. Nothing must stain the purity or tarnish the lustre of that image. And she must be ready to give her very life rather than take any blemish.

Purity of heart purifies the whole soul and transfigures the commonest life, until it shines with almost angelic radiance. A writer says: "True refinement is not outside polish. It goes deeper and penetrates the very foundations of character. It is purity, gentleness, and grace in the heart which, like the perfume of a flower, breathes out and bathes all the air about it in sweetness. It is not culture — there is true refinement often where education has been limited, where in the speech you may detect faults and errors. On the other hand, there is sometimes high intellectual culture without any true refinement. That which really refines is purity of heart."

These are very true words. Purity of heart makes the homeliest woman lovely and gives refinement to the plainest life. Did you ever open a drawer and find it filled with rich fragrance, every article in it saturated with the odor? What did it? A little quantity of rare perfume hidden in a corner of the drawer. Such is the effect of true heart-purity in any woman's life. Its sweetness strikes through and is manifest in every feature, in every movement, in the speech, in the eye, in the conduct and spirit. Other lives are touched and sweetened, — homes, whole circles and communities, — all by the delicate purity of one tender, loving heart.

Let every young girl guard her purity of soul. It is essential to true womanhood. It were as congruous to speak of a rose or a lily without beauty, as of a womanly character without delicate purity. Preserve that, and though your portion be poverty, hardship, suffering, sickness, or sorrow, this one candle will shine with calm, steady light in all the darkness.

"You are pure, you say: are your thoughts as white
As the snow that falls with the midnight's hush?
Could you see them blazoned in letters of light,
For the world to read, and feel no blush?

"If you stood in the court of heaven, 'mid swift,
Glad greetings of loved ones who know no wrong,
Could you bare your heart to them all, and lift
Unshrinking eyes to that spotless throng?"

Another quality of Mary's character was peace. Martha was fretted and worried with the affairs of her life. Duty was too large for her. She had a heart-feverishness which made her restless and unquiet, and greatly marred the beauty and sweetness of her life. But Mary had learned the blessed secret of peace, and it was the holy calm of this inward peace that made her so lovely. Nothing disturbed her. Her soul was imbedded in the love of Christ, like some pure silver lake amid the mountains, so deeply hiding, so walled about, that no storm ever stirred its quiet bosom.

Peace is one of the elements of beauty in all Christian womanhood. Fretfulness, anxiety, discontent, irritability, or lack of self-control in any form mars human loveliness. But peace makes the face shine. It gives quietness even in turbulence, composure amid confusion, confidence in peril. It is a lamp of quiet joy in time of sorrow. The secret of it is a heart fixed upon God. "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee." It is one of the blessings Christ gives out of his own life to the trusting one that sits at his feet. "My peace I give unto you," he whispers. Every young girl should learn the secret of heart peace. It is one of the sweetest charms of Christian womanhood.

Another quality of loveliness in Mary was her gentleness. Every glimpse we have of her shows this. When her sister chided her she had no impatient answer, no retort of hurt feeling, such as

we sometimes hear in a home, when criticism, just or unjust, is made by one of another. The sweetness of Mary's spirit was not marred nor disturbed by Martha's display of irritation, nor by her fretted anxiety. We find the same gentleness again in Mary when Judas found fault with her anointing of Jesus, and spoke so cruelly, so unkindly, of her act of love. Her heart must have been sorely pained by the cold criticism, but she manifested no impatience, said nothing in reply. This spirit of patient gentleness that moves through all rudeness and uncharity, and all unjust and unkind treatment, and is not provoked, does not lose its sweetness of spirit, is a feature of Christ's own beauty. It was thus that he moved through the unloving and unfriendly world, reviled, but reviling not again, hurt in his sensitive soul by men's rudeness and hate, but never losing his sweetness for a moment.

This was one of the elements in Mary's spirit which pleased Jesus. Martha, with all her usefulness, was fretful and censorious, but Mary was sweet in all circumstances.

A little poem tells how the useful corn spurned the lilies which were only sweet, then how the Master came and praised the lilies, with not a word about the corn :

" Said the corn to the lilies,
' Press not near my feet;
You are only lilies,
Neither corn nor wheat.
Does one earn a living
Just by being sweet? '

"Naught answered the lilies,
Neither yea nor nay;
Only they grew sweeter
All the livelong day;
And at last the Teacher
Chanced to come that way.

"While his tired disciples
Rested at his feet,
And the proud corn rustled,
Bidding them to eat,
'Children,' said the Master,
'The life is more than meat —

"'Consider the lilies,
How beautiful they grow;
Never King had such glory.
Yet no toil they know.'
Oh, how happy were the lilies
That he loved them so!"

A gentleman, speaking of a young lady who is cultured, beautiful, accomplished, and has many qualities of rare attractiveness, gave, as the highest praise of her, the best commendation he could give, "With all these gifts and accomplishments, she is a very gentle girl." He considered gentleness the crowning beauty of her character; and he was right. If, with her fine education, her brilliant attainments, and her beauty of face and manner, she were ungentle, unamiable, petulant, disagreeable, she would not be lovely.

There is a wondrous charm in a gentle spirit. The gentle girl in the home may not be beautiful,

may not be well educated, may not have many gifts, may not be musical, nor an artist, nor clever in any way; but wherever she moves she leaves a benediction. Her sweet patience is never disturbed by the sharp words that fall about her ears. The children love her because she does not tire of them. She helps them with their lessons, listens to the tales of their little frets and worries, mends their broken toys, makes their dolls' dresses, straightens out the tangles for them, settles their little quarrels and differences, and finds time to play with them even on her busiest days. When there is sickness in the home she is the angel of ministry and comfort. Her face is always bright with the outshining of love. Her voice has music in it as it falls in cheerful tenderness on the sufferer's ear. Her hands are wondrously gentle as their soothing touch rests on the aching head or as they perform their countless little kindly ministries about the bed of pain.

Once in crossing a meadow I came to a spot that was filled with fragrance. Yet I could see no flowers anywhere, and I wondered whence the fragrance came. At length I found, low down, close to the ground, hidden by the tall grass, innumerable little flowers. It was from these that the sweetness came which filled all the air. I enter certain houses. There is a rich aroma of love that pervades all the place. It may be a home of wealth and luxury, or it may be plain and bare of ornament. No matter; for it is not the house, nor the

furniture, nor the adornment, that makes this air of sweetness. I look closely — it is a gentle woman, mother or sister, quiet, patient, hiding herself away, like a humble flower, from whose sweet life flows the fragrance which fills all the house.

> "The lives that make the world so sweet
> Are shy, and hide like the humble flower:
> We pass them by with our careless feet,
> Nor dream 't is their fragrance fills the bower,
> And cheers and comforts us, hour by hour."

There is a little fable of an angel and a rosebud. The angel who cares for the flowers slumbered one spring day in the shade of a rosebud. Awaking, he said, "Most beautiful of my children, I thank you for your refreshing odor and cool shade. Could you ask now any favor, how willingly would I grant it!" "Adorn me, then, with a new charm," replied the rosebud. So the angel adorned the loveliest of the flowers with simple moss. Sweetly it stood there, a lovely moss rose, the most beautiful of all roses. Close beside every young girl stands One greater than an angel, who holds in his hands all gifts and graces. He looks into your face as you pray for more grace, and asks what new adornment he shall give you. Pray for the spirit of gentleness. No other gift will make you such a benediction to others.

These are a few of the elements of beauty which I find revealing themselves in Mary, as she sits at

Christ's feet. These are some of the lessons she learned there on her low stool, as she looked up into the great Teacher's face. Every girl and young woman may learn the same lessons at the same place. The Master comes into your home, if you open the door to him. This is not merely a fragment of an old story. Thousands of other young women since Mary's day have sat at Christ's feet just as Mary did, and have received the same blessing. Make time in your life for many a quiet hour of loving companionship with Jesus. Begin all your days with him. Find many a moment for meditation and prayer, for pondering Christ's words and resting in his love. Thus will your life grow into sweet beauty, into radiant womanhood.

Look now at the second scene in Mary's life. Sorrow came into that happy home. The only brother died. It was a most affectionate household. The sisters and brother lived for each other. A very sacred friendship knit their lives together. Therefore, when the brother died, the grief of the sisters was very sore.

After the funeral Jesus came. Martha went out to meet him, and then Jesus sent for Mary. "Mary, therefore, when she came where Jesus was, and saw him, fell down at his feet." So we find her again at Jesus' feet, this time in her hour of great sorrow. You know what comfort she found there. Jesus wept with her, then spoke words which revealed to her the blessed hopes of

immortality, and then gave back to her again the brother she had lost.

I keep your thoughts on this scene — the weeping woman at the Master's feet — only long enough to say that there is no other place of true comfort in time of sorrow. Let me remind you also that this second picture in Mary's life could never have been there if the first had not gone before it. If she had not sat at Christ's feet as a learner, to drink in his words and learn the lessons of love, faith, and peace which he taught her, she could not have gone to his feet in her sorrow to find comfort. And think what that sorrow would have been to Mary without Jesus!

I am not seeking to cast any shadow upon glad lives when I say that every young woman should learn in the sunny days where to find light in the days of darkness. If you are about to enter Mammoth cave, while you are still outside in the sunshine, the guide puts a lamp into your hand. It seems useless then, as you walk down the green bank, and its beams appear pale and dim. But when you enter the cavern you understand the value of your little lamp, and its light is very beautiful as it shines in the dense gloom. The lamp of Christ's comfort may seem useless to you in the happy days of youth, when you have no sorrow, but some time it will grow dark about you, with no earthly light to shine upon your path, and then this heavenly lamp will be most welcome.

Keep the picture before you, therefore — at Christ's feet in sorrow. It will teach you where to go when the night darkens about your own soul.

Then there is a third scene in Mary's life, and once more we find her at her wonted place. It was only a few days before Jesus died. Lazarus was living again. The old home-life was moving on in its accustomed sweetness. Very grateful were the hearts of the sisters, and their gratitude showed itself in a feast in honor of the Friend who had brought back their beloved one from the dead. Side by side sat Jesus and Lazarus at the table. Martha served — Martha always served. Again we find Mary at her old place — at Jesus' feet. This time she is there in gratitude, honoring him who has so blessed her life.

"Then took Mary a pound of ointment of pure nard, very precious, and anointed the feet of Jesus." Is there not something like this which the Christian young women who read these pages can do? Is there no alabaster box of sacred ointment which they can bring out and break, to anoint the feet of their loving Lord?

Christ's own feet are no longer sore, weary, and bleeding, needing the delicious soothing of your ointment; but all about you are his loved ones, his little ones, to whom your gentle ministry would be a most grateful blessing. There are aching heads and tired feet which do need the soothing.

Think of the opportunities for sweet service

which come to nearly every Christian girl. She finds them, first, in her own home. There is constant danger that the duties which lie closest shall be overlooked while the eye is watching farther off for services conspicuous and large. One writes: "It is the greatest pity that so many who are constantly active outside, are quite useless in the family. Sweetness of temper and unselfishness at home; a readiness to put one's self out and lend a helping hand in all the little details of daily life would not interfere with Sunday-school teaching and Christian work."

Surely the place which should first of all be sweetened with the perfume of your ointment is your own home. Let the blessing of your cheerful love and your thoughtful, unselfish ministry fall first upon your weary mother, your burdened father, your tempted brother, upon the children in your household, on guests who drop in, on servants who help in domestic duties.

"The house was filled with the odor of the ointment." Every house in which dwells a Christian young woman should indeed be filled continually with the odor of the ointment of her sweet life of love.

But this is not all. The odor that filled all the house floated far outside. The whole world is sweeter to-day for Mary's deed. The Christian young woman who blesses her own home with her love cannot but be a blessing wherever she goes.

Yet still must it be remembered that the service is almost sure to lie near at hand, not far away, and that it will consist, not of conspicuous deeds which the whole world would praise, but of quiet, modest, unnoted ministries, which no eye, perhaps, but God's shall mark.

Here is a sick neighbor whom you may comfort by a visit. Here is a poor woman who will be helped beyond measure, not by money gifts, but by little kindnesses which cheer her heart and strengthen her for her heavy toil and care. Here is a blind woman to whom you can read an hour or two each week, and with whom you can talk of the great beautiful world on which she can never look. Here is a little child that lacks true home sweetness in her own life, or who is not taught about the love of Christ. You can become as Christ to this neglected one, saving her for him.

An opal lay in the case, cold and lustreless. It was held a few moments in a warm hand, when it gleamed and glowed with all the beauty of the rainbow. All about us are human lives of children or of older persons, which seem cold and unbeautiful, without spiritual radiance or the gleams of indwelling light which tell of immortality. Yet they need only the touch of a warm human hand, the pressure of love, to bring out in them the brightness of the spiritual beauty that is hidden in them. In many cases the hand of a Christian

young woman is the very hand God wants to touch these dull, lustreless souls into radiant life.

It matters little what the particular form of ministry may be. God knows what he wants his children to do. The important thing is to be filled with the love of Christ; then wherever you go you will be a blessing. Here is a beautiful little prayer which every Christian young woman may fitly make her own:

"May every soul that touches mine —
Be it the slightest contact — get therefrom some good,
Some little grace, one kindly thought,
One aspiration yet unfelt, one bit of courage
For the darkening sky, one gleam of faith
To brave the thickening ills of life,
One glimpse of brighter skies beyond the gathering mists,
To make this life worth while
And heaven a surer heritage!"

George Macdonald says: "If I can put one touch of a rosy sunset into the life of any man or woman, I shall feel that I have worked with God." Surely it is better to live to do such beautiful things, than it is to pass one's days in the rounds of fashion, living an empty, selfish life and leaving no blessing in the world.

Jesus said of Mary: "She hath anointed my body beforehand for the burying." It has always been a sweet thought to me that she did not wait till he was dead to bring her ointment. Many people do wait till their friends are gone before they

break the alabaster vases of their love to pour out the fragrance. One writes: "We live as if we had already reached the land

"'Where no bond is ever severed,
Partings, claspings, sob and moan,
Midnight wakings, twilight weepings, heavy noontide,
All were done.'"

We forget that soon the friend or neighbor who walks by our side to-day will be gone, and that then it will be too late to do the gentle things it is in our heart to do. Mary teaches us not to wait for sorrow to draw out the shy love, but to bring our ointment to anoint the weary feet while they are in the midst of the toilsome journey. The flowers you mean to send for the coffin of your friend or neighbor, send beforehand to brighten his hard path, and to cheer his sadness or loneliness while he lives.

Mary's memorial has also its encouragement for those who would repeat the sweet story of her love. Jesus said: "Wheresoever the gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, that also which this woman hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her." So the story is written in among the records of Christ's own last days, and is there kept as fresh all these centuries, as if it had been told only yesterday. Why? Because it was done for Christ, out of love for him.

That is the kind of memorial Christ keeps of any beautiful thing wrought for love of him. He will forget nothing. Men go about with hammers, breaking the rocks, and find embedded in the heart of them the imprint of ferns, leaves, flowers that fell on the soft clay long ages since. Every line and vein and fold is preserved in perfect feature. Your smallest deeds of love for Christ, which seem to be forgotten, are writing their records these common days in God's book of life, and in the ages to come their story will be read by angels and men.

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